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Sid Kalish, Advertising Dir.  
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New York 21, N. Y.

William R. Stewart, Midwest  
9 South Clinton St.  
Chicago 6, Ill.

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810 So. Robertson  
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# Champs Don't Dive

by Jack Ritchie



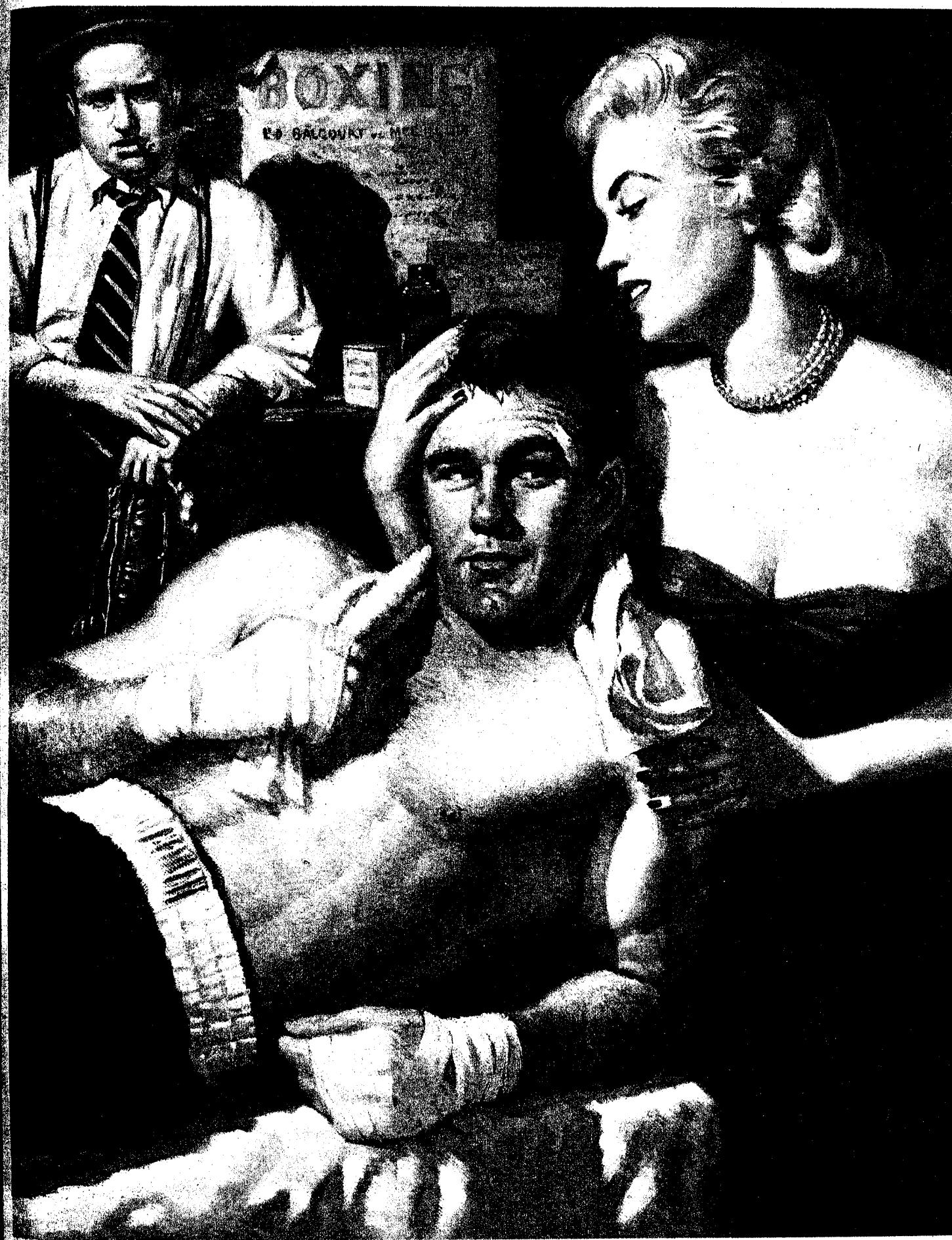
Rocky Cooper was stronger than I was by now and he knew it. His left eye was swollen shut, but one eye was about all he needed for getting in close. He ducked under my jab and slashed away with body punches. I managed to tie him up, but not before he pumped some of the air out of my lungs.

The bell ended the fourteenth and I dragged back to my corner wearily and sat down. Max Webb talked into my ear while the seconds went to work on the cut above my right eyebrow. "If I was doing the score, you could hand him the last round and still be ahead. But try not to look too bad. Sometimes judges forget to mark until the fight is over and then they lean in the direction of the boy who finishes strong."

Max got out of the ring at the buzzer and I hauled myself to my feet. I came out slow to conserve strength and let Rocky do the forcing. It was a slow round for me because I was taking more and more of his punches. With less than a minute to go, one of his hooks caught me ducking under and I grabbed for his waist until I could clear my brain.

The crowd came to its feet and Rocky tried hard for the kill. He threw punches from the floor hoping for the big one to connect, but I managed to ride out the storm. I had my *(Continued on page 50)*

**Suddenly a bomb smashed into my face and we both knew he was going to kill me if he could!**





## Champs Don't Dive

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arms around him and my chin deep in his shoulder when the bell ended the fight.

I rested on the ropes in my corner while the ring announcer collected the slips. He stepped to the microphone. "Judge Harry Franklin scores it 8-6-1, favor of Jimmy McGuire." There were boos and catcalls while he looked at the next piece of paper. "Judge Ed Munson, 8-7, McGuire. Referee Mike Turney, 8-5-2, McGuire. The winner by unanimous decision and still champion, Jimmy McGuire."

It wasn't a popular decision. Not particularly because the fans thought Rocky should have had it, but simply because they hadn't liked the way I faded in the late rounds.

In the dressing room, Max stood to one side and waited for me to make my announcement. I was supposed to say to the reporters, "Boys, that was my last fight. I'm hanging up the gloves for good." And this was the time to say it because Wilson of the Tribune had just brought up the subject of a rematch. Instead I answered another of the questions I heard. "He's a strong boy," I said. "But I didn't think it was that close."

Wilson persisted. "Cooper gave you one of the best fights you've had. A rematch ought to draw a big gate."

I got off the table. "It's the shower for me," I said. "If you got any more questions, ask Max. He does my thinking."

I leaned against the warm spray, letting it soak into my skin until I was reasonably sure the dressing room would be empty. Then I made the switch to cold and got out. Max was sitting on a bench with the evening newspaper folded to the crossword puzzle. "I didn't say yes and I didn't say no to anything," he said.

I put on my shirt. "I suddenly discovered I got pride and it confuses me. All in all this is a hell of a time to quit. It would look like I'm running away from Rocky."

When I finished dressing, Max handed me the puzzle and a pencil. He looked at his watch and gave me the go-ahead. When I finished, I looked up.

"Twelve minutes and forty-five seconds."

I tossed away the newspaper.

Max tried to console me. "So maybe the puzzle was a little tougher today. You didn't take many head punches." He picked up my equipment. "Now tell me so I know how to act. Are you quitting, or aren't you?"

"I got to sleep on it, Max."

At the hotel I left Max and went downstairs to the tap room where I expected to meet Maggie Prentiss. Maggie has a lot of blonde hair, intelligent eyes, and a

supersensitive heart—in the presence of gold.

She smiled as I sat down. "You look like you've been in a fight," she said.

I poured beer into my glass. "How much did you make on this one?"

"Five hundred. I didn't want to risk more. You're getting old, you know."

I tried the potato chips. "People who make money on my bruises are parasites."

She grinned. "It's the only way I'll ever get any money out of you."

"You're a grasping, greedy woman," I said. "I wouldn't marry you in a thousand years."

"You're missing something. Deep within me there lies loyalty, devotion, love, and understanding. Have I missed anything?"

I looked at the girl who had just come into the room and stood near the doorway, her brown eyes searching.

"That's Jessie Flynn," Maggie said. "Mike Flynn's daughter."

Mike Flynn was a man who had a dozen fighters under contract and Cooper was the big horse in his stable. Some people had the idea that Flynn wouldn't recognize an honest dollar and I was one of them.

Maggie waved a hand at Jessie Flynn. "I used to know her in high school." Jessie returned the wave and walked over. "Jessie," Maggie said. "This is Jimmy McGuire."

I nodded my head modestly. "Pound for pound the greatest fighter in the world."

Her eyes were remarkably clear and candid as she smiled slightly. "I wouldn't say that."

She raised her eyes to look at someone who had walked up behind me. It was Rocky Cooper and he had eyes for her alone—at least as far as he could see out of one of them. It was a good 15 seconds before he noticed whose shoulder he was smiling over.

"Hello, Rocky," I said. "Take a chair. You look exhausted."

He scowled. "I like standing. I hear some reporter-talk that you're dodging a rematch. I'm trying to guess why that could be."

I put down my glass. "Are you working up to call me something?"

Maggie rapped on the table with her highball glass. "Before you two resume killing each other for free, how about ordering me another drink."

Jessie rose and got a firm grip on Rocky's arm. "Good night, Maggie. It's been nice seeing you again." She looked at me icily. "Good night, Mr. McGuire."

"Good night, Jessie."

When they were gone, Maggie eyed me. "All right. Why the gap in your good temper?"

"Before I started using a cane, I could have taken him in two rounds."

She patted my hand. "Maggie believes you."

"Tonight was supposed to be my last fight. But I didn't look good enough to quit."

Her eyes met mine. "Now is as good a time as any. You've still got the championship, your brains, your money, and half your good looks."

"What did you think of me tonight? I looked superb, didn't I?"

"I only bet on your fights," she said. "I don't have to watch them."

The next morning at breakfast, I told Max. "If Rocky wants the rematch, get it."

MAX didn't look happy about it. I smiled at him. "You act as though I'm ready to fall apart."

"With the other competition you could go on for years and nobody would notice you're past the top. But with Rocky in front of you . . . He's no boxer, but he's strong and he's got a heavyweight punch."

I finished the last of the bacon and eggs. "I see that Rocky's running around with Mike Flynn's daughter."

"So I hear. Flynn's not happy about it. He figures she's made for better things."

The rematch was arranged and a few weeks later I was having an afternoon nap in my bedroom when Max broke up a pleasant dream. "If you want to throw a fight," he said, sticking his head in the room. "I got an offer."

I yawned my way into the living room. Mike Flynn was in an easy chair and a wooden-faced man in a brown suit stood next to him.

"The real reason I called you was so that you could throw them out," Max said. "I'd do it myself, but I got a headache today."

Mike Flynn was in his 50's, florid and heavy. His lips were wrapped around a cigar and his hard eyes went over me. "It's this simply," he said. "You take a dive in the fifth. For this you get 20 G's and my blessing."

"A lousy 20 G's for the championship?" I asked, hurt.

"Don't hold me up," he said. "On this you don't have to pay income tax."

I sat down and put my hands behind my head. "If you know how to say goodbye, this is a fine time for it."

The man in brown let his hand go significantly into his suitcoat pocket.

"Now, now," I said. "You know the boss won't let you use that thing when he's along."

Flynn worked his bulk to a standing position. "I'll leave you to mull it over. Happy thinking, everybody."

Max mopped his forehead when they were gone. "I'm even more nervous than I look. Think Flynn will try any rough stuff?"

"Not a chance. I'm the champ and too many people are looking at me."

When I went downstairs for my usual pre-bedtime beer, I found Jessie Flynn sitting alone at the end of the bar. I took the stool next to her. "I apologize for last

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time," I said. "And I've dreamed about you every night."

She made her glance disinterested. "I'm afraid if I'd thought of you at all, it would have given me insomnia."

"What pretty sharp teeth you have." My smile was persistent and she finally had to meet it halfway. "See," I said. "It's not so difficult. Naturally you're waiting for Rocky and I'll bet the thoughtless man is late."

Her eyes went to her watch. "Yes."

"I'd show him not to trifle with my time. By the way, I know where the Ricardo Club is."

She thought about the information and appeared tempted.

"After all," I said, "a little competition may be what he needs." She collected her purse and stood up. "I'll take you up on that."

On our way out, we passed Maggie. I made a circle with my thumb and forefinger and winked at her.

At Ricardo's a glass of champagne warmed Jessie's smile, but she cautioned me. "Subdue the sparkle in your eyes. You have nothing but conversation ahead of you."

At 10:30 the lights dimmed for the floor show. I listened patiently to the customary chanteuse while I studied Jessie's profile. I leaned closer for more accurate inspection. A hand on my shoulder spun me away and a stinging right dropped me to the floor. I rolled and knocked down a table and some of the people sitting around it.

When something like that happens, it's usually enough to start a free-for-all, and this was no exception. Women began screaming and the men, happy in the anonymous dark, swung at their nearest neighbors with no malice, but great gusto.

When the overhead lights went on, the fighting came to an abrupt halt, but not quite soon enough for me. A perfect stranger, evidently too wound up to stop, let loose a last punch that crushed into my jaw. For a moment I saw something brighter than the overhead lights and then I went down the slide into unconsciousness.

Minutes later, my mind crawled back up. The first thing I heard was the sound of traffic. I looked at the nape of a taxi driver and then into Maggie's face.

"Say something intelligent," she suggested.

I sat up. "Where's Jessie?"

"Probably safe," she said drily. "Rocky took her out of Ricardo's."

I explored my jaw for a fracture. Maggie put a cigarette in my mouth and lit it. "There I was," she said, "peacefully sipping my highball when Rocky came looking for Jessie. The bartender must have overheard you mention Ricardo's, he passed the word. Rocky's eyes started sending smoke signals and he loped off. Naturally I followed to watch the excitement and offer my sympathies. It was cute the way your silhouette and Jessie's blended in a dream of love."

"You're true blue," I said. "Loyal."

"And a good cook. You owe me the 10 it cost to have the porters haul you out to the cab."

I tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Stop at the first newsstand and get me a paper."

I finished the crossword in 10 minutes and went to bed. In the morning I tried to phone Jessie, but a butler's voice kept insisting that she wasn't there. I gave up when Max and I had to make the train north for our camp.

I trained hard, knowing that I wanted to make my last fight a good one and that Rocky had blood in his eye. I lived the spartan life, sleeping 12 hours a day and being good when I was awake. When we returned, I was steel-hard and ready for anything.

Max was in the living room when I came up after breakfast the next day. "You're fighting an engaged man," he said, looking up from the newspaper. "Rocky and Jessie Flynn are in the papers."

"I'll bet the old man's throwing a fit."

The buzzer sounded and I opened the door. It was Maggie.

**S**HE found herself a chair. "How's your reaction to Jessie's engagement?" she asked me.

"It's too painful to talk about."

"I didn't have to read the papers," Maggie said. "I ran into her at a style show last night and she told me all about it. We made girl talk until nearly 11:00."

Maggie lit a cigarette and looked from Max to me. "I have a friend who never works but always has money. Also he drinks, and when he does, he tells things to me that are supposed to be secret. I learned that Flynn's betting \$500,000 on the fight."

"The man has confidence," I said. "Good for him."

"He's betting it all on you to win, Jimmy."

Max and I exchanged glances and Max rubbed his forehead. "Flynn hates Rocky for wanting Jessie," he said. "That's it, I hope."

"Not according to Jessie," Maggie said. "He's so happy about the engagement that he even bought Rocky a new car."

There was silence while Max and I thought about it.

"All right," Maggie said finally. "Outside of the small matter of it being illegal to bet against your own man, it has its other interesting points. I can't imagine Flynn risking that kind of money unless he were positive of not losing it. Am I getting close to something I shouldn't know?"

Max and I looked at each other and he shrugged his shoulders. "Tell her what we guess," he said.

"Maggie," I said, "Flynn tried to buy me into a dive with 20 grand. But he found that I couldn't be bought and so it looks like he did the next best thing. Rocky's taking the dive instead of me."

I began pacing the room. "The money Flynn has on the fight tells me that, and the smiles for Rocky tell me that, too. Maybe the smiles were part of the bargain."

Maggie watched me for a while. "What are you worried about? You're slated to win."

I stopped walking. "I don't want it that way."

"You'd rather take an honest beating? Is that it? Your pride won't be satisfied if you get to win the easy way?"

"That's right," I said. "My pride gets in the way. I don't want any part of a fix."

The next morning I reported for the weigh-in and saw Jessie in the anteroom waiting for Rocky. He was scowling at everything in sight, but mostly at me. He registered a 174 and I shoved the red marker up to 172.

"How's Jessie this morning?" I asked him. "I thought she looked a little tired last night," I laughed with embarrassment. "I mean she looked tired this morning when I saw her outside."

He stared at me. "She went to a style show last night."

"Of course, Rocky," I said. I looked away and started fumbling with the buttons of the shirt I was putting on. I yawned. "Excuse me. Didn't get much sleep last night. A poker game," I added hastily. "That's right, isn't it, Max?"

Max blinked. "Anything you say."

Rocky stood immobile, watching me while I dressed. I finished in less than a minute and went into the anteroom with Max. I walked over to Jessie. "I've been meaning to apologize for leaving you in such an unorthodox manner the last time we met." I kept one eye on the frosted glass of the door to the weigh-in room.

"It's really Rocky who should apologize," she said.

I saw shadows form behind the opaque glass and the doorknob turned. I leaned extremely close to Jessie. "I think you're looking very well today."

The door opened and Rocky stood in the doorway. I jerked away from Jessie. "Well," I said nervously. "It's been nice seeing you again, Jessie—I mean, Miss Flynn." I took Max by the arm and hurried out.

I rested until fight time and then Max and I drove to the arena. At five after nine, the last prelim was over and I took the walk down the aisle with my retinue. I looked around ringside until I found Jessie Flynn. She sat with her father, three rows back on the west side.

Up in the ring, I waited until Rocky had a clear view of me and then I waved my glove at Jessie and grinned broadly. When I met Rocky's glowering eyes, I quickly dropped my hand. I studied the floor at my feet with great concentration.

When the ring show was over, Rocky and I met in the center for instructions. The ref droned the routine and asked for questions. "By the way, Rocky," I said. "Jessie came to my dressing room and told me to pass on the message that she can't make it tonight."

"Why not?" he asked automatically and then did a double take. "Your dressing room?"

I let him see that I was thinking desperately. "Well . . . She couldn't get into yours or something like that. I think the cops or the ushers held her back." I turned on my heel and went back to my corner.

Rocky's teeth were clamped hard on his mouthpiece as he came out at the bell. I danced around him and stabbed

(Continued from page 52)

him with three sharp lefts and got out of range of his return. He came after me, slugging for the body, but I caught the blows on my arms.

As I'd expected, he went light on punches to the head, but he didn't do any pulling when he went for the body. He had to work off some of the hate and suspicion he felt for me, but still he didn't want to take the chance of dropping me with a head punch.

A couple of straight rights over his low guard didn't help his disposition. He came in low and tried to crowd me into the ropes, but I got a glove under his elbow and spun him. When he regained his balance, his face was flushed with anger.

I kept out of reach the rest of the round, tantalizing him continually with long left jabs. At the bell, I put my arm momentarily around his shoulders. "Nice going, kid," I said.

In the second I came out with a grin that had a touch of insolence in it. I back-pedaled as he cut the air with vicious body punches. He bulled after me, but he still remembered enough not to try for my head. He managed to land a hard left to my ribs and I clinched. I rapped a few hooks to his kidneys and then put my glove under his chin and pushed him sharply away. I bowed slightly while he was on his heels and it got a laugh from the crowd.

Furious red flooded his face as he rushed me, and one of his pounding rights got through. It was one of those lucky solar plexus punches, and my knees collapsed like hinges as I sank to the canvas.

I looked up when the referee got to the count of five and, despite the fact that I was fighting for air, I had to grin. Rocky was standing in a neutral corner with a look of terrible worry on his face. He was pulling for me to beat the count.

I rose at eight and he came toward me uncertainly, afraid that if he hit me again I might go down for good. To keep it from looking too bad, I got in close and

fell into a clinch. Then it occurred to him that clinching was a fine way to pass the time, so the ref spent the rest of the round trying to separate us. The fans were boozing as it ended.

When I sat down in my corner, I noticed one of Rocky's seconds whispering urgently in his ear. Rocky looked my way and our eyes met. I smiled wisely and he had to look away quickly as the temper came surging back. "It looks like they're not taking the chance that their boy will put me down again," I said to Max. "They're probably telling him to take the dive right now."

"Don't fight it," Max said. "It's bigger than both of us."

When Rocky answered the third, I tagged him with a few very light jabs, but he was waiting for something better. We kept up the light stuff until the customers indicated their displeasure and the ref had to warn us to mix it up. Rocky's eyes went to the clock and I could see that he was getting impatient. He was going down this round even if he had to faint.

I stepped back and studied him for an even 10 seconds while the fans looked around for things to throw. Rocky's hands were almost at his sides and he was begging for a punch, any kind of punch. I moved into a clinch and stepped hard on his toe. I lingered there while a lot of pain and puzzle flashed into his face.

When he rescued his foot, I put the back of his neck in the palm of my left glove. And then very carefully so that no one could possibly mistake it for a punch, I put my open right glove over his face and rubbed hard back and forth across his nose. He jerked away angrily and I was gratified to see that the nose was the reddest part of his face.

Elbowing aside the startled ref, I did the same thing over again, but much harder. Rocky's face purpled with rage when he got it out of my glove and something like a growl came from his throat. I wrapped my arms around him and got my mouth close to his ear. The mouth-

piece gave me a little trouble, but I managed to make the words clear. "Now I remember why Jessie can't meet you tonight. She's going to the doctor to get that mole removed. You know, that one that's real low on her hip."

He shook his way clear in a convulsive movement, his eyes blazing. There was nothing else in his mind now except the fact that he was going to kill me if he could. Instinctively I wanted to step out of range of his attack, but this was what I had been working for. I had Rocky as mad as it was possible to get him. If ever he got back to the boys in his corner they'd talk him back to sense and I didn't think he'd ever get wild enough to forget his instructions again.

I'd never been a slugger before, but now I had to turn into one for the few seconds of honesty that were in this round. I planted my heels and we battered away, standing toe to toe. This was no science, no skill, and there would be no time for it. We were just two men beating each other, each one of us hoping for more endurance, more power.

AND then it came. I saw it coming, but my left arm was too paralyzed with the shock of his blows to come up in time for the block. His right exploded in my face and the world changed to pain and piercing light and then slithered into darkness.

Max brought me out of it in my corner in time to hear the time of the knockout. I noticed that Rocky didn't look particularly happy at being the new champion, but there was radiance in Jessie Flynn's face, and I guessed she knew nothing about a fix being in order. Mike Flynn was near apoplexy, but what could he do to the man who was going to be his son-in-law except hate him full time?

After a short session with the reporters in my dressing room, I lay down on one of the tables and waited for the fatigue to leave. "Well, Max," I said. "That does it. Now I go to pasture."

Max puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. "It's best," he said. "In a way, Jimmy, I think you won this fight, if you know what I mean."

The door opened and Maggie came in. "I hope everybody's decent. Are you all right, Jimmy?"

"I thought you said you didn't come to my fights?"

"I didn't think this was going to be one."

I crooked my forefinger. "Come a little closer. You're the one with energy." She came beside me and looked down. She put her hand on my forehead.

"Did I ever tell you that you have beautiful hair?" I asked. "Were you the one who told me you were a good cook?"

"I specialize in Swiss steak."

My arm went around her waist and stayed there.

"I think you'd better work a crossword puzzle before you go any further," Maggie said. "That last punch was pretty hard. I felt it myself and it hurt."

The crossword took me 25 minutes, but I don't think the punch had anything to do with it. After all, it's hard to concentrate when someone's nibbling on your ear.

END

"Finally found a way to make him practice!"

